The Chicago & Paducah Railroad

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Livingston County was created in 1837. It was one of the last parts of Illinois to be settled and farmed because it was swampland, and there were no railroads to import needed supplies or export farm products.

These two problems were solved by railroads built in the 1850s and drainage of the swampland by orange clay field tile in the 1880s. Fortunately, the 1878 Livingston County history book by LeBaron recounts the construction and routes of the first railroads built in Livingston County.

The first railroad in Livingston County was the Chicago & Mississippi Railroad, running from Joliet to Alton. It was built in 1853 and 1854. A few years later, it was purchased by T. B. Blackstone and renamed the Chicago & Alton Railroad. Initially, the stations on the main line were Dwight, Odell, Cayuga, Pontiac, and Ocoya.

In 1857, the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border. The villages of Fairbury and Chatsworth were created on the new railroad. This railroad was later renamed the TP&W (Toledo, Peoria, and Warsaw Railroad).

In 1865, Mr. Samuel L. Fleming of Pontiac, an investor in early railroads, got the Illinois legislature to approve a charter for a new railroad from Ottawa to Fairbury. Initially, it was named the Fairbury, Pontiac & Northwestern Railroad. This name was later changed to the Chicago & Paducah Railroad. Eventually, the name was again changed to the Wabash Railroad.

The charter investors were S. C. Ladd, B. P. Babcock, Samuel L. Fleming, Nelson Buck, Jonathan Duff, William Strawn, R. B. Harrington, S. C. Crane, John Dehner, Walter Cornell, M. E. Collins, Ralph Plumb, Enoch Lundy, David McIntosh, H. L. Marsh, W. G. McDowell, J. W. Strevell, I. B. Tyler, and William B. Lyon.

These charter investors were businessmen and lawyers of that era. Ladd Street in Pontiac is named after S. C. Ladd. Nelson Buck was a surveyor who was murdered in Nebraska by the Sioux in 1869 along with several young men from Pontiac. John Dehner's brick house still stands in Pontiac and is now called the Jones House. Henry Marsh discovered coal in Fairbury, and Marsh Park is named after him. Judge W. G. McDowell's house still stands in Fairbury, and he founded McDowell, Illinois, and Fairbury, Nebraska. Abraham Lincoln spent an afternoon and evening at the home of J. W. Strevell, and this house is now called the Strevell House in Pontiac.

In 1867, the charter for this new railroad was amended so it might run anywhere northerly and southerly of Pontiac, that point being retained. A company was formed in 1869 with M. E. Collins as President and S. S. Lawrence as Secretary.

Bonds were issued by the Livingston County townships of Indian Grove, Avoca, Eppard's Point, Owego, Pontiac, Amity, and Newton to pay for the railroad construction. The Fairbury, Pontiac & Northwestern Company contracted with Colonel Ralph Plumb of Streator, Colonel W. H. W. Cushman of Ottawa, and David Strawn to build and equip the new railroad.

All the bonds were transferred, and stock was also issued to them, so the railroad became theirs after construction. The contract to build the railroad stipulated that the new railroad would never be transferred to the Chicago & Alton Railroad, with the intent of the new railroad always competing with the existing Chicago & Alton.

In 1872, the new Chicago & Paducah Railroad started track construction in Streator and ran southeast through Livingston County. It then ran through Ford, Champaign, Piatt, Moultire, Shelby, and Effingham Counties to Altamont. The stations in Livingston County included Newtown, Cornell, Rowe, Pontiac, McDowell, Lodemia, Fairbury, Murphy's Station, and Strawn.

At Streator, the Chicago & Paducah connected with the Ottawa branch of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad. It initially had 41 miles of track in Livingston County.

A few years after the Chicago & Paducah Railroad was built through Livingston County, the track connecting Fairbury to Strawn was removed. The Fairbury to Strawn line was no longer needed because other railroads ran south from Forrest. The track at Fairbury was connected to the TP&W line. The point where the Chicago & Paducah Railroad turned south from Fairbury towards Strawn remains a historical mystery. After 150 years, no traces of this Fairbury to Strawn branch can be found.

The Chicago & Paducah Railroad started in Streator and ran south into Pontiac. The 1923 Sanborn Insurance map of Pontiac shows the Chicago & Paducah (renamed to the Wabash on the map) railroad coming from the north into Pontiac around the intersection of Aurora and Indiana Streets. It went southerly through Pontiac and left Pontiac on a bridge (which no longer exists) across the Vermilion River just east of what is now Chautauqua Park. One photo does exist showing the bridge over the Vermilion River by Chautauqua Park.

This railroad then proceeded in a southeastern direction to McDowell, Lodemia, Champlin, and the northwest corner of Fairbury. The Chicago & Paducah came into Fairbury on the northwest side of town, crossed TP&W tracks, and then ran parallel to the TP&W. There was a depot on the west side of Fairbury. Only one poor-quality photo still exists that shows this long-gone depot.

After the Chicago & Paducah came into Fairbury, the tracks ran parallel and just south of the TP&W tracks. What is now Walnut Street was called Paducah Avenue long ago.

In the 1970s, the tracks from Pontiac to Fairbury were in poor condition, and the trains had to travel at slow speeds. This railroad ran until the late 1970s, when the tracks were removed from Pontiac to Fairbury. The outline of this track can be seen where it intersected roads going in an east-west direction.

The Chicago & Paducah Railroad, later renamed the Wabash, ran in Livingston County for about 100 years. It allowed farmers between Pontiac and Fairbury to export their grain products to many different markets in the United States.

This bridge no longer exists. It was in Pontiac and just east of Chautauqua Park.